

Chapter 1

Ezekiel's Call - Ezekiel 1-3

Ezekiel 1:1-3 acts as an introduction both to the whole book and to its first major section. It introduces us to the prophet responsible for the book, his circumstances, and two important dates that enable us to immediately understand much important background information. This introduction is followed by the first major section of the book (1:4-3:27), where we are given Ezekiel's credentials as a prophet. Foundational to Ezekiel's prophetic call is the vision of God he receives. This is described for us at some length (1:4-28). But in itself, a vision of God does not give the prophet his mission. Ezekiel's mission is outlined in God's command to him to go and warn His people (2:1-3:15). Nor did God leave Ezekiel in any doubt that his mission would be easy. Indeed, He told him that it would be rejected, but because of the terrible consequences facing His people, Ezekiel was still to give His warning. Only by doing this could he clear himself of bloodguilt (3:16-27).

In this chapter, we will look briefly at the information given in 1:1-3, then at the three major segments that make up Ezekiel's call - his extraordinary vision of God, his mission, and his responsibilities as a watchman.

Getting Into the Word

Ezekiel 1:1-28

Read through Ezekiel 1 twice. On the second reading, begin to respond to the following questions. If you are keeping an Ezekiel notebook, have it nearby so you can write out your answers and other thoughts that come to you.

1. Every writer faces the challenge of how to begin. With a major work such as the book of Ezekiel, a great deal of thought would have been given to how the reader should be oriented. Read Ezekiel 1:1-3 with great care. List the specific elements that are highlighted. Why are we told what we are?

2. What is the picture Ezekiel is trying to describe in 1:4-28? If you have any drawing skills, try to draw a picture (or pictures) of what he is describing.

3. List all the occurrences of the words like and appearance in the passage. In a paragraph or two, write out your conclusions regarding the implications of these words for what Ezekiel is trying to describe.

4. Compare the description of the throne room of God in Ezekiel 1 and Revelation 4. List the major similarities and differences.

5. Read also Ezekiel 10:9-22 and compare what you find there with what you have just read in Ezekiel.

6. Given that Ezekiel's message was to go to those in exile in Babylon, in what ways do you think Ezekiel's vision of God on a movable throne has implications for those who first heard his message?

7. In a paragraph or two, summarize what you see as the heart of Ezekiel's message to the captives of Chapter 1.

8. Use the maps at the back of your Bible or your Bible atlas to remind yourself of the distance between Babylonia and Jerusalem.

Exploring the Word

Ezekiel's Introduction (1:1-3)

As well as introducing the first vision, 1:1-3 acts as the introduction to the whole book. Verses 2 and 3 tell us that the first vision came to Ezekiel in the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin and that the recipient of the vision was Ezekiel, the priest, who was in the land of the Babylonians. In our introduction to Ezekiel, we have already explored in some detail the significance of each of these items of information, so we will only need to touch briefly on three important points here.

First is the significance of the date. It was the fifth year of the exile of Jehoiachin (1:2). Unstated, but important, it was also the fifth year of the reign of Zedekiah, in Jerusalem. The kingdom of Judah, while it had become a vassal of Babylon, still owed its existence to the leniency of the Babylonians. The nation faced a time of terrible crisis: Would it submit to Babylonian rule, or would it attempt to overthrow the Babylonians with the help of the Egyptians?

Second is the significance of the fact that Ezekiel is prophesying in Babylon (vs. 3). Ezekiel's Babylonian location serves both as a warning to those back at Jerusalem of their fate if they rebel against the Babylonians and as notification that Ezekiel himself is an exile. All exiles long for their home, and part of Ezekiel's message was the discouraging news that while the exiles would be restored to their homeland at some future time, this would not happen in the near future.

Third is the significance of the fact that Ezekiel was a priest (vs. 3). Only the prominent families of Jerusalem had been taken to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kings 24:14-16), so Ezekiel would have belonged to a prominent priestly family. This may well be the significance of the enigmatic reference to “the thirtieth year” in Ezekiel 1:1. If this refers to Ezekiel’s age, then it would have been about this time that under normal conditions he would have entered into his official temple duties at Jerusalem as a priest (Num. 4:3). Instead of this relatively stable life and secure surroundings, Ezekiel finds himself called to a different kind of ministry. He is a priest without a temple, an exile, and called to be God’s spokesman to a people under threat of destruction who will refuse to harken to his warnings. With these clues, Ezekiel next puts before his readers his qualifications as a prophet.

A Vision of God and Its Implications (1:4-28a)

Prophets speak on behalf of God, and Ezekiel’s credentials as a prophet are good. As he now goes on to point out to us, he is a prophet because God directly appeared to him and gave him his prophetic commission. We are given a description of how this happened. Ezekiel was in Babylonia by the Kebar River when he looked up and saw a fierce windstorm driving a cloud toward him (vs. 4). Nor was this just any cloud. As it came closer, he could discern remarkable beings through the flashing lightning surrounding the cloud. They were human in appearance but had four faces, four wings, and feet like calves (vss. 5-14). They were accompanied by wheels full of eyes (vss. 15-18). Fire was in their midst. Above them was an expanse, which looked like ice (vs. 22). This expanse, or division, acted as both a ceiling above the creatures and a floor for the sapphire throne, which was surrounded by a rainbow. On the throne sat One who had a human appearance but was really indescribable. He was glorious and bright (vss. 22-28).

There are several striking things about this vision. The first is the inadequacy of human language to describe God. Ezekiel is struggling to find words to describe what he has seen. Notice how often he uses the words like and appear: the four living creatures were not men, they had only the appearance of the form of a man (vs. 5); they had feet like a calf, and they gleamed like burnished bronze (vs. 7); their appearance was like burning coals of fire, and they sped back and forth like flashes of lightning (vs. 13). While the wheels had the appearance of wheels (vs. 16), they hardly fit the category of “wheel.” They looked like a

wheel intersecting a wheel (vs. 16, NIV), or a wheel within a wheel (NRSV), and their rims were full of eyes (vs. 18). They did not turn in the direction they were moving, but rather they went as the Spirit led (vss. 17, 19, 21). The boundary between the creatures and the throne of God was something that looked like the expanse of the sky (the same Hebrew word is used to describe the firmament of the heavens in Genesis 1:7); it sparkled like ice (Ezek. 1:22).

Inadequate though these words are to represent what he saw about the chariot and throne of God, at least Ezekiel gives us enough detail so we can gain some impression of what he saw. But when he comes to God Himself, Ezekiel can describe Him only in the vaguest of terms: God is surrounded by light, first by bright clouds and a rainbow (vs. 28); and then what little can be discerned of God Himself is drenched in great brightness, like that of molten metal (vs. 27). All that Ezekiel can say about Him is that He was somewhat human in appearance. Finally, Ezekiel carefully points out that he never really saw God, only the appearance of the likeness of the glory of God (vs. 28). Ezekiel cannot really describe what he saw, because God is indescribable. Nor is this surprising, because there are no adequate human words to represent God, and we cannot press the details of Ezekiel's description further than he has indicated they should be understood.

The point is this: Ezekiel gives us but a word picture of what he saw, not an accurate description of what God actually looks like. Yet, despite the inadequacies of human language, Ezekiel has managed to give us one of the more memorable images of God in the Old Testament. The glowing cloud, the color of the rainbow, the blue ice on which the jasper throne sat, and the extraordinary chariot with its fascinatingly strange creatures all create an unforgettable impression of the glorious and mysterious nature of divinity.

The second striking thing about the vision is the appropriateness of the imagery to its Mesopotamian location. The vision of God was received in Babylonia, a region of Mesopotamia from which archaeologists have been able to recover a large number of original ornaments and works of art. The art of the Assyrians, the Babylonians, and the Persians was filled with composite creatures not unlike the four creatures seen by Ezekiel and Daniel (who also prophesied in the Babylonian Empire during his early ministry).

The accompanying figures (from Klein, 20-22) are taken from art discovered in the region. In Figure 1, on the next page, you can notice winged creatures that are human in appearance and have human arms,

but which also have feet like calves. They appear to be holding up something that forms a boundary on which sits a creature that grows out of flames.

In Figure 2, on page 55, you can see images of composite creatures with wings, which are understood to hold up the sky. These types of creatures are called “sky-bearers” by archaeologists. Figure 3, on page 56, is taken from a depiction of the Egyptian goddess Hathor, who is portrayed with more than one face. Thus, while the vision Ezekiel saw was striking, he would not have been taken completely by surprise, since he would have had opportunity to see images somewhat like those in his vision on the walls and in the art of the cities in which he found himself. Perhaps God deliberately appeared to Ezekiel in a manner in which he and his listeners would be able to comprehend.

The third striking thing about the vision is its meaning in terms of the throne of God in the temple. As Moses led the children of Israel out of their captivity in Egypt and toward the land that God was going to give them, God commanded Moses to build Him a sanctuary that He might dwell with His people (Exod. 25:8). The wilderness tabernacle, and the magnificent temple built later by Solomon, was divided into three areas: the courtyard, the holy place, and the most holy place. Significant furniture was associated with each of these. Within the most holy place was placed a wooden chest called the ark. Over the top of it was placed a solid gold “atonement cover” (NIV) or “mercy seat” (KJV, NRSV). At each end of the mercy seat was a winged cherubim. God

said that He would meet with His people between the cherubim and over the mercy seat (Exod. 25:10-22). This was understood as a symbol of God’s throne as is shown by the references to “the Lord Almighty, who is enthroned between the cherubim” (1 Sam. 4:4). In 1 Chronicles 28:18, the ark and the cherubim are called God’s chariot.

In Ezekiel’s vision, we find all these elements present: winged cherubim (cf. 10:20, 22), God appearing between and above the cherubim and upon His throne-chariot, which moves on something akin to wheels. God has moved from His temple in Jerusalem to meet with Ezekiel in Babylon. Which brings us to the fourth striking thing about this vision: it contains a message of hope.

At least two aspects of the vision would bring hope to Ezekiel: the reassurance that God was still with His people in their exile and the rainbow around the throne. Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, had chosen to set up His residence in Jerusalem, in the most

holy place of the temple. It was there, between the golden cherubim, that He met with His people. Prophets such as Isaiah had emphasized that God was not just the God of His people, but of all nations (e.g., Isa. 40:12-17, 21-23). Yet even so, it must have been difficult not to become discouraged with the house of God many months' journey away, while the houses of the gods of your conqueror were all about you. The vision given to Ezekiel strongly removes this lingering doubt. It shows that God is not confined to Jerusalem. God's throne is movable; He can meet with His people wherever they are, even in exile in Babylonia.

The rainbow around the throne also brought a message of hope, with its reminder of a previous disaster and God's reaction to it. After the Flood, which destroyed everyone outside the ark, God made a covenant with all humanity that He would never again destroy all flesh. The sign of that covenant was a rainbow (Gen. 8:20-9:17; especially 9:11, 13). With destruction threatening his nation, Ezekiel could not but be comforted with this reminder of God's promise not to destroy all humanity again.

The final striking thing about Ezekiel's vision of God is the presence of parallels between what Ezekiel describes and what John the Revelator describes in Revelation 4. When John mentions what he saw in the great throne room of heaven, he describes several things that are strongly reminiscent of Ezekiel's vision. God is surrounded by a rainbow (Rev. 4:3; cf. Ezek. 1:28). There are blazing lamps before the throne (Rev. 4:5; cf. the torches of Ezek. 1:13); there are four living creatures covered with eyes (Rev. 4:6; cf. the eyes of Ezek. 1:18), and they have wings like the cherubim of Ezekiel (Rev. 4:8; cf. Ezek. 1:6).

John doesn't describe God's throne in exactly the same terms as does Ezekiel, nor would this surprise us. In heaven God may well be surrounded by different things than those that accompany Him on His movable throne on which He met with Ezekiel. Furthermore, we have already noted the inadequacies of human language to describe God.

Both Ezekiel and John the Revelator struggled to convey their vision of God. They each described what they saw in slightly different ways. But both describe an awesome Presence, a Being before whom we prostrate ourselves in worship. This is not the safe God of the theology textbook. This is the divine reality, and who is able to contain this God, the God of unapproachable light? In Jesus, God has shown His true nature: He is loving and self-giving. Jesus is our Mediator, who stands in the very presence of God, who has given us access right into

heaven itself, so that we can come before God confidently and with boldness (Heb. 8:1,2; 10:19-22). But never should we forget who God is. The angel of Revelation 14:7 brings the message to all the inhabitants of the earth: “Fear God and give him glory.” God is awesome. God is worthy of worship. When we perceive God, our first thoughts are not how to express our idea of Him in theological language. No, like the prophet, we wish to do no more than fall down before Him to worship Him.

Getting Into the Word

Ezekiel 1:28b-3:27

Read the passage through twice. On the second reading, begin to answer the following questions:

1. List the instructions given to Ezekiel concerning his mission in chapter 2. What does that chapter predict as the probable result of his preaching?
2. What title does God give to Ezekiel in chapter 2 (and throughout the book)? Compare that usage with how this title is used in Daniel 7:13 and Christ’s use of the title for Himself in the Gospels (see Matt. 9:6; 12:8). How is Ezekiel’s mission the same and different from the other “Son of Man”? Compare your conclusions with the discussion of the “Son of Man” in a Bible dictionary. What has the dictionary article added to your knowledge of the topic?
3. List those things that can be learned about Christian responsibility from Ezekiel 3. 4. What can be learned in chapter 3 about witnessing in difficult situations?

Exploring the Word

Ezekiel’s Commission (1:28b-3:21)

As he perceives the vision of God, Ezekiel falls to his face (vs. 28b). The Spirit, or wind, raises him to his feet (2:2). Here we see a glimpse of the linkage between Spirit and wind, brought about by the fact that the Hebrew word *ruah* can mean either spirit or wind. Thus the windstorm of 1:4 was but a manifestation of the Spirit, the Spirit, or wind, which also chose where the wheels would go (vss. 20,21). Some of this divine Spirit, or wind, entered into Ezekiel and raised him to his feet. At the end of Ezekiel’s conversation with God, the Spirit (or wind) lifted him up and took him away to the exiles living at Tel Abib (3:12-15).

God addresses Ezekiel as son of man. In fact, Ezekiel's name is mentioned only twice in the whole of the book: once in introducing himself (1:3) and once when God speaks about him in the third person, to say that Ezekiel will be a sign to the people (24:24). On every other occasion that God addresses Ezekiel - and there are many such occasions - He calls him "son of man." There is a certain appropriateness in this. Ezekiel sees God Himself, and his response is prostration and worship (1:28). There is a vast difference between the most high God and the human Ezekiel. It is this difference that is highlighted by God's calling him "son of man." In the book of Ezekiel, this phrase emphasizes Ezekiel's mortality.

An equivalent Aramaic phrase is used in Daniel 7:13, but there we find a different kind of "son of man." In Daniel, this son of man is found in the heavenly court, in the presence of God and is given glory and sovereign power and is worshiped by all nations. When we read the Gospels, we also find the phrase son of man. It is a favorite way for Jesus to describe Himself (Matt. 12:8; 16:27; Mark 8:31, 38; Luke 22:22, etc.). Jesus frequently uses the term, and with only very rare exceptions, is the only one in the New Testament to so describe Himself. The way Jesus uses the term has been intensively studied, and the general conclusion is that He is primarily drawing on the picture of the son of man in Daniel, chapter 7. Jesus uses this imagery to show His unique heavenly status as one who stands between humanity and God, and who represents humanity to God.

As well as contrast, there is also similarity between Ezekiel's usage of the phrase with that of Jesus and Daniel. Ezekiel fulfills much the same kind of role: He is a human, standing between God and humanity, telling humanity the message of God.

Ezekiel's commission was to go to his own people with God's warning. As 3:4-6 says, these are his own people. In exile, they are surrounded by many different groups, all speaking languages that are difficult to understand. Some of the frustrations of the exiles can be felt in 3:6, which speaks of "many peoples of obscure speech and difficult language, whose words you cannot understand." No, Ezekiel was not told to speak to them. Rather, he was to go to those who would understand him, to the house of Israel. But even though they would understand him, God warns Ezekiel they will not heed his words (2:4, 5, 8; 3:7-9). So it was not an easy task to which God called Ezekiel.

Unlike the people to whom he was to speak on God's behalf, Ezekiel was not to be rebellious. He was told to take and eat the scroll,

which God offered him (3:1, 2). The scroll was written on both sides. This was unusual, because scrolls were normally manufactured from papyrus by beating together two layers of papyrus that had been laid at right angles to each other. On the side used for writing, the layer was in the direction of the writing. The other, on the back of the papyrus, was at right angles to the writing. This made it very difficult to write on the back of a scroll, and it was hardly ever done. The relatively few scrolls made from animal skins also had one side on which it was easier to write. Yet this scroll was written on both sides. No explanation is given as to why the scroll was unusual in this respect. Perhaps there was a great deal to be said, or more likely, it was written on both sides so that nothing more could be added to the message as it was given Ezekiel.

Papyrus is not something that is usually part of a meal, but obedient to God's command, Ezekiel ate the scroll. It was very sweet in his mouth (vs. 3). No matter how harsh its contents, and no matter the prospect of future difficulties, receiving the message of God was something very pleasant to Ezekiel. It was like eating honey, the sweetest thing available in the ancient world. Other prophets have also had the same experience. When given a scroll by God, they find the experience wonderfully sweet. John the Revelator found that while the words were sweet in his mouth, they were sour in his stomach (Rev. 10:9, 10). Jeremiah found when he ate the words of God that they were his joy and his heart's delight, yet at the same time he complained that his pain was unending and his wound grievous and incurable (Jer. 15:16, 18).

Not even Ezekiel found the experience of meeting God a purely sweet experience. Afterward he sat for seven days overwhelmed (NIV), stunned (NRSV), or appalled (Brownlee, 36), all of which are possible translations of the original expression in 3:15 (Taylor, 67, f.n. 2). His call left him in great bitterness and anger in his spirit (vs. 14). It is no small thing to be called to be a prophet, and while direct confrontation with God has its glorious moments, it also has its emotional costs. God has called Ezekiel to stand virtually alone against all his contemporaries. Standing against others is hard even in today's individualistic Western society; how much harder it was for Ezekiel, living as he did in a culture that had much stronger group loyalties and ties. Ezekiel had to come to terms with this, as well as with his reactions to meeting God in His glory, something traumatic enough in itself. Furthermore, Ezekiel's call also brought with it a divine compulsion. He was unable to speak

unless God used him to speak (vss. 26, 27). He was even constrained in his movement (vss. 24,25).

Responsibilities of Those Who Know of Coming Danger (2:4-8; 3:8, 16-21)

Thus has Ezekiel been called: He meets God face to face, who then personally commands him to approach His people. This call is an overwhelming experience, sweet but deeply troubling. Yet there is something more that God would have Ezekiel recognize, and that is his responsibility to those in danger. Sin brings with it bloodguilt. Ezekiel's position of privileged knowledge brings with it the terrible danger of accumulating bloodguilt. If he does not warn either the wicked or the righteous of the consequences of their sins, then he, Ezekiel, will be accountable for their blood (3:18,20). Only if Ezekiel warns them of the consequences of this sin can he avoid this danger to himself. Once warned, if they persist in sin, then they become accountable for their own blood (vss. 19, 21).

It is at this point in the account of Ezekiel's call that modern readers begin to ask uncomfortable questions about their own responsibility to others. Nor is this question out of place in a commentary series that is subtitled "A practical guide to abundant Christian living." What, then, are our responsibilities to those around us, many of whom do not know Jesus' love or that He is returning soon to put an end to sin and its consequences? Furthermore, should our attitude be that of Ezekiel, who was given a forehead of hardest stone (vs. 9) so that no matter how much he was rejected by those around him, he would fearlessly continue his message of warning?

Should this be our attitude toward those we believe need warning? Are we not to care how they receive our words or how offensive we are to them? This last matter is one of real importance, because we all know some Christians who probably do more harm than good in their attitudes to others. Unlike Jesus, they are harsh and judgmental of those around them. And that is the point. Jesus came to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10). He was full of compassion to those who erred and showed patient love to those who rejected Him, and even those who hated Him. Not only this, He urged this same attitude on His followers. But this is not the only side to Jesus. There was the time He threw the moneychangers out of the temple, for example (Matt. 21:12-17 and parallels). Perhaps this is the message we are to learn. God calls us to be like Jesus, to be compassionate of the downtrodden, loving to

all - especially those who hate us, and patient with ourselves and with others. Yet there are times when such attitudes are not appropriate, and Ezekiel belonged to such a time. A terrible danger was about to overtake Jerusalem, and the holy nation was heading straight for its own destruction. Ezekiel's responsibilities were clear: He had to warn his nation of its own deadly peril.

Perhaps the message we are to learn from this aspect of Ezekiel's book is rather like the piece of good advice I once received: you cannot fight every issue, so choose your fights, making sure the fights you pick are important. Generally you should try to restrict your activities to those areas where you can make a difference. But there are a small number of matters of principle that should be fought for, even though it is unlikely you will win on them. Ezekiel's whole ministry was devoted to such a fight. It was a ministry doomed to failure but one so important it could not be avoided. Ezekiel's responsibilities were heavily upon him.

Applying the Word

Ezekiel 1-3

1. To what has God called me? How have I responded to His call? Have I found the experience as sweet as Ezekiel did?

2. What is my picture of God? How does it compare with that of Ezekiel and John the Revelator?

3. I know that Jesus came to this world to save sinners. I know that He died and rose again. I know that Jesus is coming back to this world to deal with sin. What are my responsibilities to those around me who do not know these things? Does what God said to Ezekiel apply to me also? In what specific ways can I put these lessons into action?

4. How have others received what I have shared about my beliefs? If they haven't all accepted what I said, what is the problem? Were they like Ezekiel's hearers, obstinate and stubborn (2:4), or could I have approached the subject in a way that made it more attractive to them?

Researching the Word

1. Compare the calls of Ezekiel 1:2-3:27, Isaiah 6:1-13, and Jeremiah 1:4-10. Divide a page in your Ezekiel notebook into three columns. List the elements of each prophet's call in the appropriate column. How are their calls alike? How are they different? What are the common elements in all three calls to prophetic office?

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2. Jeremiah 15:16-18, Revelation 10:9,10, and Ezekiel 2:9-3:3 (cf. 3:14) all speak of eating something that was sweet in the mouth. Compare these three passages. What is each saying? Compare and contrast Ezekiel's experience with that of each of the other prophets. In what ways was Ezekiel's experience different? Why do you think that was so?

3. Compare the visions of God received by Moses, Isaiah, and Daniel (Exod. 3:1-6; 33:18-23; 34:5-9; Isa. 6:1-13; Dan. 7:9, 10).

Further Study of the Word

1. Both J. Taylor, Ezekiel, 52-74; and R. Craigie, Ezekiel, 9-27, provide concise, yet excellent, discussions of Ezekiel 1-3.

2. A good place to begin investigating the Babylonian parallels to the vision of God on His chariot throne is R. Klein, Ezekiel, 18-24; this may be supplemented with L. Allen, Ezekiel 1-19, 26-37.

3. If you have a particular question on a particular verse that has not been answered by what has been said so far, remember that the Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary comments specifically on most verses.

4. The commentary of W. Brownlee, Ezekiel, 6-19, while more technical and including references in unpointed Hebrew, contains some further useful information on the vision of God on His chariot throne, including references to the parallels from Qumran, the use of this imagery in the book of Revelation, and references to other secondary literature on the passage.